



## BEST PRACTICES DATABASE

### CITY OF WILMINGTON

**Mayor James H. Sills, Jr.**

#### Juvenile Drug Court Diversion Program

To combat rising juvenile crime rates and inconsistent rehabilitative methods, the City of Wilmington decided to emulate a successful adult drug court diversion program for its youthful offenders. Though resources are always scarce, the City was a recipient of a federal Comprehensive Communities Program grant and was able to use a portion of this funding to develop the program. The City contracted with a non-profit substance abuse provider, SODAT-Delaware, Inc., to provide the treatment component for the adolescents. The program itself is supervised and monitored by the State of Delaware's Family Court.

The Juvenile Drug Court concept is based on the idea of diverting substance abusing juveniles from prosecution through treatment, education and case management services. Fundamentally, this concept is predicated upon early intervention for first-time juvenile drug offenders. The goal is to help these juveniles develop the skills and maturity necessary to prevent their further penetration into the juvenile justice system.

Under the diversion concept, charges are held open in Family Court as long as the juvenile is in treatment and in compliance. If he or she successfully completes the program, the charges are dropped. This is important because in Delaware a drug conviction causes the loss of driving privileges until a juvenile reaches the age of 21. In addition, the juvenile will avoid an adjudication and the potential of a subsequent criminal record. Most importantly, the juvenile will have the opportunity to address the issues surrounding his or her arrest. The role of the Court is unique in this program. The Juvenile Drug Court Diversion Program uses the power of the Court to facilitate and monitor treatment. The Court holds case reviews twice each week with the juvenile, the parent(s) and treatment staff in attendance. Each juvenile is seen by the Court once each month. All active clients attend weekly treatment groups and meet with their counselor for individual sessions at least once each month. In addition, a social worker is retained to provide family therapy sessions. This family therapy component of the program works to educate and support families in their development as crucial members of a successful treatment team.

Of the 111 juveniles that have accepted diversion since the program's inception, only eight have been unable to complete the program and were removed by the presiding Judge. This represents a non-compliance rate of seven percent. Of the total entrants, only seven have been re-arrested. They were not removed from the program, however, due to the nature of their offenses and their positive progress in treatment. The supervising judge, at his discretion, has permitted these juveniles to remain in the program, citing the best interests of the juveniles and their community. There are 71 active clients. These clients, when combined with the 32 that have successfully completed the program, represent a 93 percent compliance rate.

The success of this program can be directly attributed to program and treatment staff working directly and effectively with the Juvenile Probation Department, school districts, employers and the Family Court to ensure that clients are being closely monitored and that they are receiving appropriate treatment services. The staff works diligently to strengthen relationships with the school system. Counselors visit the juveniles' schools to meet with teachers, counselors, principals and other professional staff who work with the clients.

Overall, it appears that the program has been very effective. The recidivism rate for the program is approximately 6.3 percent as compared to the national rate of about 60 percent for juveniles not involved in drug courts. Over the length of this program, some dramatic changes have been seen in the clients. School attendance and scholastic achievement have improved. And, of the 71) clients currently active in treatment, 90 percent of those eligible to work have remained employed or have found employment since entering the program. To enhance the program, SODAT has submitted an application to the State of Delaware's Summer Youth Employment Corps to employ 20 of the juveniles through an eight-week community service project. SODAT has also obtained athletic scholarships for summer youth camps with the City's Parks Department. Finally, SODAT is also submitting an application to Americorps for an educational awards program available to students in appropriate fields of study who serve as mentors for the Juvenile Drug Court graduates through an after-care support network.

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